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The NATO Gambit Backfires

Senate troubles for SALT II persist, thanks to President Carter's failure to link the treaty's ratification with survival of the Western alliance, an ill-conceived effort that collapsed at last month's NATO political assembly in Ottawa.

Headlines proclaimed that assembled members of the alliance's parliaments had called for early Senate ratification of the arms control treaty. But behind the scenes, there were bitter recriminations among U.S. delegates and attempts by embarrassed Europeans to tone down the unrestrained language drafted for them by the Americans.

Those efforts belied the Carter administration's claim that Western Europe is pleading for salvation through SALT. Rather, it was American SALT-sellers in Ottawa who unwittingly buttressed the Soviet campaign against nuclear modernization in order to label Senate rejection of the treaty as subversive to NATO's future.

This NATO gambit bears a family resemblance to Carter's successful strategy for passage of the Panama Canal treaty. Instead of arguing the merits of giving away the canal, the president's men warned that rejection by the Senate would reap havoc throughout the Western Hemisphere and lined up Latin American statesmen to agree. Lloyd Cutler, Carter's chief SALT-seller, pursued the same strategy in tying an umbilical cord between SALT II and NATO.

But European political leaders proved less malleable than the Latin Americans. NATO parliamentarians visiting Washington resented being manipulated into a Senate debate. Members of the British and West German governments (including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) publicly declared that, of course, NATO would survive the death of SALT II.

At this point, SALT supporters sought to revive the NATO gambit at the Ottawa meeting of the North Atlantic assembly. With European parliamentarians on hand in Canada, their U.S. congressional counterparts remained in Washington for late votes. They were preceded, however, by a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer named John Ritch, renowned on Capitol Hill as a passionate arms controller.

Ritch brought to Ottawa a draft resolution urging "early ratification" of SALT and bearing the names of two pro-SALT senators: Republican Jacob Javits of New York and Democrat Joseph Biden of Delaware. It is widely believed, though denied by the White House, that inspiration came from the administration.

Peter Coterier, a Social Democratic member of the West German Bundestag and a supporter of SALT, was asked to introduce the resolution. After some hesitation, Coterier agreed. His initial caution might have stemmed from its extraordinary language. Besides contending that U.S. failure to ratify SALT would be "seriously disruptive" to NATO, it specified that would be true "particularly with regard to the forthcoming decision on the modernization of NATO's theater nuclear forces." Europeans were amazed at U.S. officials seeming to buttress the Soviet campaign against NATO's nuclear modernization.

With the U.S. delegation still in Washington, the assembly's military committee toned down the American language. The warning against undercutting, nuclear force modernization was struck. So was a clause contending that linkage of "the current situation in Cuba to SALT ratification would unnecessarily jeopardize alliance security interests." The committee also added what the Javits-Biden resolution omitted: "respecting... the sovereign right" of the United States to decide on SALT and noting requirements for "credible deterrence, stable nuclear balance and future arms control negotiations."

When the U.S. delegation finally arrived in Ottawa, anti-SALT senators were outraged to discover the existence of a resolution demanding Senate ratification ready for passage by the assembly. A "caucus" of Americans followed, in which pent-up bipartisan passions were unleashed.

Two anti-SALT Democrats, Sens. Henry M. Jackson of Washington and Ernest F. Hollings of South Carolina, assailed Biden for not consulting them. Jackson accused Biden of conspiring with White House counsel Cutler, contending that "this whole thing" is "a Cutler operation which has backfired." While taking full responsibility himself, Biden apologized for lack of consultation.

Apology or not, Biden and Javits refused to change the resolution so that only an early "decision"—not "ratification"—would be urged. After much rancorous debate, it was finally decided that all U.S. senators would abstain from the voting. Added to the abstention of the French delegation plus that of conservatives from Britain and West Germany, that made 38 abstentions against 71 in favor—less than a certain trumpet.

The Ottawa meeting deepened SALT divisions among senators and intensified concern by British, French and German parliamentarians over what the Americans are doing. Thus, the NATO gambit won over no new senators for SALT but raised questions about the president's devotion to the Western Alliance among our puzzled European allies.